

Preparing Mr. Veneer: Notes of a Writer-in-Residence

Mr. Veneer loves service and he is sumptuously served. Uncompromisingly dedicated to the ideal that the richer a man is, the more servants he keeps in his employ, Mr. Veneer currently employs ten: a cook, a maid (there had been two before Aphid left), a butler, a chauffeur, a valet, a barber, an astrologist, a gardener, a special assistant to the valet (newly hired), and myself, writer-in-residence and private secretary.

Marsh, special assistant to the valet, came just a month ago, right after Aphid resigned and took up residence in Westchester, New York. Of course, the valet's job has changed some in the last year. That's why we had to get another man and it wasn't easy. Mr. Veneer has special needs.

My job has changed several times too. The sonnets, of course, have gone on from the beginning right down to this very day. One each morning. The time is always the same now. Once it changed from day to day. I would read you the sonnet I wrote this morning if the law permitted, but, of course, they are all the property of Mr. Veneer and now he no longer gives permission for anything.

Be that as it may, the days are easier now. More regular. In the old days, before his blindness, I started work at 6:30. Now I don't start till nine.

Then my day began with Mr. Veneer's private dictation, his diary, letters to ex-wives, letters to his friends. They all had to be done in longhand. Mr. Veneer dislikes typewritten correspondence.

He thinks it rude.

Writing letters in his own hand is, of course, quite ungentlemanly.

After breakfast, I present the sonnet. When they have shaved and bathed him, we are all called in and I read my sonnet first. Then Miss Pola reads the astrological forecasts: for all of us, including Marsh. Mr. Veneer is last now. Till his blindness he was last, then first, and now he is last again.

Mr. Veneer was looking forward to his blindness.

I wrote sonnets on darkness two months before the occurrence. First I read the one Milton wrote on blindness, but I found that too sad for what Mr. Veneer called "a great adventure." It was an eclipse of the sun observed

by the naked eye that ended his sight. He called it his "first important step toward self-realization."

The ophthalmologist who examined him afterward called it madness, but Mr. Veneer regarded it as a triumph, a complete success. He gave the ophthalmologist one of his favorite chess sets.

Mr. Veneer collects chess sets.

But it wasn't a complete success. He never regained any of his sight, but there was a month of extensive pain. He hadn't counted on that.

My tasks increased greatly during Mr. Veneer's blind period.

I read to him every morning: the newspapers, novels, sports magazines, the daily chess problems, letters from ex-wives, telephone numbers, stock market quotes, and my sonnets, of course. Even t.v. listings. Everything.

Mr. Veneer said he had developed his sense of hearing to its fullest. He listened to birds, high pitched whistles, wind, electric coffee pots, matches, fires, mechanical toys, and watches. Once he spent an entire afternoon listening to a wind-up clock. He spent three hours listening to Miss Aphid's heart. "All the mysteries of life's waters are here," he proclaimed prosaically. "The rivers and creeks and lakes and tide pools, the whispering swamps, the little cascades...."

I read my sonnets a little later during the blind period. At ten o'clock. Looking back, it must have been the period he most liked. The most contemplative. It is still my favorite.

The deaf period was the worst for me.

We all tried to talk him out of that idea, deafness I mean, but he had made his mind up. When money makes its mind up there is no stopping the catastrophe. We had to call in three experts. They were to provide a series of tremendous electronic explosions all piped directly to Mr. Veneer through sophisticated electronic equipment.

The ringing went on for months.

I did no more reading. Mr. Veneer turned toward the comforts of touch and smell. Textures and food. Sex. I had little to do with that. We had girls in every evening. Specialists. Miss Pola could tell you more about that.

The bath became extremely important. Peter, the valet, soaked him in rich oils, while Fred, our barber, shampooed and massaged his scalp. As Peter dried him, Fred would clip and comb his hair. Mr. Veneer talked a great deal about the luxury of hair. His was thinning.

His meals were elephantine.

At one breakfast, I recall him eating ten poached eggs, a bowl of raw oysters dipped in lemon and butter sauce, tripe, two calves' livers, eight slivers of tongue, an orange colored peppery cheese, a pound of sliced ham, and most of a double mold fruit salad. He vomited five times, restoring himself after each bout with a bowl of borscht and a cup of chicken soup.

During those periods I would read my sonnet before breakfast. Not that it mattered. He had no interest in communications. Miss Pola tried to teach him finger spelling but he became annoyed and wrote out these instructions: READ THE SONNET AND THE FORECAST EVERY DAY. I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY SAY. ANSWER MY EX-WIVES LETTERS IN THE SAME FASHION. Mr. Veneer was more concerned with food and clothing.

We ordered him silk underwear and leather shirts. He had hats made of snakeskin, suspenders fashioned from electric cable, hair shirts, pajamas made of rats' fur. There was one pair of raccoon pants, though I don't think he ever wore them, and a hat made of springs and balls, a toy he never tired of in those days. It gave him the greatest amusement, reminding me of a court jester, and in truth Mr. Veneer remarked once after he had put that hat on that he was becoming more and more of a gentle idiot. "I'd take a bite out of the moon," he said. He wore silk stockings and women's underwear and a straw coat, drank the worst wines and spoke and sang about ignorance being bliss.

Dreadful.

He had great fun touching things. Butterfly wings and spider webs; surgical instruments and wet slate; rose petals and aluminum foil. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Not much to my sonnets in those days either. Dreadful time.

Smell became an obsession too. Miss Pola could tell you more about that. He spent more time smelling his evening meals than eating them. The mornings were best for eating and touching, he said; the evenings for taste and smell. He never finished the foods served to him at evening meals. Just tasted. I couldn't begin to tell

you what he tasted or how. Much of it wasn't food. Miss Pola could tell you more about that. And the food he did eat was never served on plates -- not at the evening meals -- not during the period of deafness and blindness.

Yes, that was a bad time for me. If he had been deaf without being blind or the other way around, it would have been better for me. Writing for a silent man who looks on your work with all the interest of a fire hydrant is humiliating. I was close to quitting.

The age of paralysis proved better for all of us.

The paralysis, of course, was induced. A team of surgeons were assigned to remove an apocryphal cyst in one of the cervical vertebrae, severing important nerves at the same time. The paralysis occurred mostly on the right side, only a partial success. There was still feeling on the right side. Mr. Veneer, before the surgery, called it an ideal state: "resting comfortably between life and death." Afterward, his power of speech gone, he agreed to learn finger spelling. I did my sonnets for him with the finger spelling then, and Miss Pola did the forecasts in the same way. Aphid did the actual finger spelling.

Mr. Veneer took new interests in the spiritual. He liked my sonnets to be metaphysical. I spent a good deal of my spare time reading Blake and John Donne and it was very gratifying to see his brows working away as Aphid transmitted the daily sonnets and he shook out his appreciation on the palm of Aphid's hand. He was often complimentary.

Yes, that was a good time. A metaphysical time.

Now it is a neoclassical age: very formal. I work hard on rhyme.

The day begins precisely at seven in keeping with the agreement made by Miss Aphid and the lawyers. Now she is Miss Aphid. Neoclassicism implies a certain strict compliance, form over matter, law over justice.

Peter is first in line. He comes in at seven exactly and prepares the bath assisted by Marsh, who came, as I said, after Miss Aphid left. Peter puts Mr. Veneer into treated salt water, designed to harden the flesh. After the two valets have toweled him down, Marsh sprays the entire body with a chemical. I don't know what it is, but I know it keeps the flesh from rotting.

It is all provided for in the will: a licensed undertaker to be employed at \$28,000 per year. Not an easy thing to come by, but Marsh was in one of our more famous state prisons for a time and he jumped at the chance, meals and

estate living included. Miss Pola and I still do our work conscientiously, after Mr. Veneer has been sprayed and bathed. He is looking a bit yellow these days. Marsh tells me it is the same with Lenin.

And the servants are just as conscientious: cook prepares meals for all; the gardener still tends to the grounds with oriental quiet; Albert, our chauffeur, takes cook into town to buy the groceries and sends out Mr. Veneer's letters to his ex-wives. We sometimes entertain Miss Aphid and the lawyers whose names I am not at liberty to divulge (according to the will). I believe they avoided probate.

Yes, it is a very formal age now. I don't do much secret-arying any more, but the writer-in-residence job keeps me busy: Mr. Veneer's diary, for instance. Today I wrote something about the way his hands are tightening. Then, there are letters to the ex-wives, letters to a few friends, and, of course, the sonnet.

Yes, Mr. Veneer is a man most sumptuously served. No man could desire more thorough service.

Goodbye To California

Goodbye to California
Goodbye to the everlasting spring.
Goodbye to the blurred wine
and images of women
out of focus
away from home
high on grass
sweet in the musk of sex
goodbye.

Goodbye to Griffith Park
to the Sunday love in
without love
to the drum thudding
men sexless in their quest
for everlasting sex
for the ultimate lay
the supersonic orgasm
goodbye to the lonely
men on Spring Street
and Hope Street
in the guts of MacArthur
Park waiting for the return
of Jean Harlow
Laurel and Hardy
Charlie Chaplin
Greta Garbo. Human decency.
Goodbye.